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Social Media Strategies in Second-Order Elections: Insights From the 2019 European Election Campaign

Antonio Amuza [1], Bianca Fox [2], and Valentina Marinescu [3]

[1] Faculty of Journalism and Communication Sciences, University of Bucharest, Romania
[2] Centre for Academic Development and Quality, Nottingham Trent University, UK
[3] Faculty of Sociology and Social Work, University of Bucharest, Romania

Correspondence: Antonio Amuza (antonio.amuza@fjsc.ro)

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Abstract

This article investigates the strategic use of Facebook in the 2019 European Parliament elections, challenging the traditional view of these elections as "second-order" national elections. Drawing on a comprehensive dataset, the research analyzes campaign materials from all EU member states, focusing on the thematic and visual strategies employed by political parties on Facebook. The findings reveal that digital visibility, measured by the volume of posts, is a stronger predictor of electoral success than thematic coherence or ideological messaging. The study integrates theories of hybrid media systems, symbolic politics, and cultural performance to argue that Facebook functions not merely as a communication tool but as a symbolic arena where legitimacy is performed and contested. These insights contribute to a deeper understanding of how social media platforms are reshaping the dynamics of European electoral politics.

Keywords

algorithmic visibility; digital campaigning; digital visibility; European elections; Facebook; political communication; social media

1. Introduction

The widespread use of social networking sites (SNSs) has significantly altered how people communicate, form and maintain relationships, express political views, and engage as active citizens. As interactions evolve, political organizations have adapted their communication strategies to leverage SNSs, promoting transparency and enhancing dialogue between citizens and political candidates. SNSs have become vital tools for politicians to connect with voters and mobilize supporters, enabling free participation and

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amplifying marginalized voices. Voters now have unprecedented empowerment, able to communicate freely with each other and directly with political candidates throughout electoral campaigns. The use of SNSs has revolutionized political communication, fostering a fairer dialogue between the public and political elites, and allowing citizens to scrutinize actions publicly, thereby reshaping the political process (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Gainous & Wagner, 2013). This transformation is particularly evident in EU elections, often viewed as "second-order national elections" due to their perceived lesser importance compared to national elections and their focus on national rather than European issues, although since 2009 empirical evidence shows that voters and political parties have started to place more importance on European Parliament (EP) elections (Maier et al., 2021). This shift reflects a broader trend toward the Europeanisation of political engagement, wherein supranational governance structures are no longer perceived as peripheral to national political discourse.

Extensive research highlights various reasons for SNS use during electoral campaigns, such as increased exposure at minimal cost and the emergence of lesser-known candidates from anonymity (Nulty et al., 2016; Vergeer et al., 2011). Building on theories of symbolic performance and hybrid media systems (Alexander, 2011; Chadwick, 2013), our analysis focuses not merely on usage frequency but on how visibility itself becomes a strategic resource in digital campaigning. However, evidence suggesting that SNSs complement and enrich traditional communication methods, rather than merely supplementing them, is scarce. Recent studies indicate that SNSs are often employed as unidirectional communication tools (Golbeck et al., 2010; Graham et al., 2013) rather than interactive platforms. Similarly, Lilleker et al. (2011) found that despite the interactive features of Web 2.0 integrated into the 2009 EP election campaign, these tools were predominantly used for advertising rather than fostering interactive communication with citizens. While scholars concur on the underutilization of SNSs' interactive features, there are conflicting findings regarding their impact on electoral outcomes. Some studies report a positive effect on electoral results (Koc-Michalska et al., 2016), whereas others observe that SNS engagement does not consistently lead to improved electoral outcomes (Bright et al., 2020).

There is extensive research on the use of SNSs in national election campaigns (see, for example, Ahmed et al., 2017; Babac & Podobnik, 2018; Cornfield, 2010; Ellis, 2018; Gibson, 2013; Gulati & Williams, 2013; Larsson, 2019; Magin et al., 2017; Strandberg, 2013), documenting the rate of adoption at the national level and the strategies politicians adapt to using this medium in various countries. However, there is limited research on social media adoption in European election campaigns (Nulty et al., 2016) and whether this contributes to an increased focus on European issues or better overall results for the main political parties. This article aims to bridge this gap.

The analysis presented in this study is particularly relevant in the context of EU elections, which are often described as second-order elections (Reif & Schmitt, 1980) due to their perceived lower importance compared to national elections and fewer voters who turn out to vote based primarily on domestic issues rather than European issues. Reif and Schmitt (1980) identify party campaigns as the main factor for this voter behaviour, given political parties' lack of focus on European issues in their campaign (e.g., de Vreese, 2009; Hoeglinger, 2016; Petithomme, 2012). Indeed, Marsh (1998) also observes that "parties themselves generally work to make European elections second-order national elections" by focusing on domestic rather than European issues (Marsh, 1998, p. 607). Despite this perception, EU issues appear to have become more important for voters since the beginning of the 1990s (Hooghe & Marks, 2009) which means that both politicians and the

public have started to refocus their attention towards EU issues during these campaigns, highlighting the unique dynamics at play in European elections (Senninger & Wagner, 2015). In line with this stream of thought, Adam and Maier (2016) found evidence of mobilisation on EU issues in the specific context of the 2009 EP elections, suggesting the beginning of the transition away from the previous second-order party campaign model, even if the campaign was still not centred solely on EU issues. In addition, Eugster et al. (2021, p. 1445) show that, "in the context of the 2014 EP elections, established and especially governing parties no longer silenced EU issues to the same extent that they had in the past."

Using Reif and Schmitt's (1980) second-order election model and continuing the work of other scholars (Beach et al., 2018; Eugster et al., 2021; Maier et al., 2021) that analysed the inclusion of European issues in the 2014 EP campaign, this article challenges the idea that European elections are still seen as second-order elections (at least not on social media) and seeks to add to the debate by answering the following research questions: In the age of information overload and social media saturation, what social media strategies were used by political parties in the 2019 EU election? What increased the focus of political parties on European issues? How (if at all) did Facebook adoption or non-adoption impact the overall results of the 2019 European election? While our operationalization of digital visibility focuses on the volume of campaign output (i.e., number of posts), we do not infer reach or engagement. Rather, we analyse visibility as a proxy for the intensity of campaign communication on Facebook. The focus is on Facebook not only because it remains the most widely adopted platform, but also because the dataset used in this study systematically tracked party-level Facebook activity across all 28 EU member states during the 2019 campaign. Comparable data for other platforms was not available. In February 2025, there were 5.24 billion social media users (63.7% of the global population; Kemp, 2025, p. 10) out of which 3.07 were Facebook users (more than any other social media platform; Kemp, 2025, p. 375). Our revised analysis disaggregates party-level dynamics, offering insights beyond EP group-level aggregation, thereby addressing key critiques of prior research that flattened intra-group variation and masked national nuances.

2. Theoretical Framework

The contemporary literature on political communication has increasingly emphasized the transformative role of digital media in shaping both the visibility of political actors and the structure of electoral discourse. In particular, social media platforms, most notably Facebook, have emerged as central arenas where political campaigns unfold, symbolic capital is mobilized, and voter attention is actively contested.

SNSs began to be utilized as online campaign tools in 2006 (Gulati & Williams, 2013). Due to their interactive and instantaneous nature, they quickly became indispensable for politicians and political organizations, offering an innovative means to reach a global audience swiftly. Facebook's initial use in electoral campaigns was documented in 2006 (Karzen, 2015), but its significant impact was recognized during Obama's 2008 "Facebook election" (Johnson & Perlmutter, 2009, 2011), leading to a surge in popularity. Since then, Facebook has been increasingly adopted by politicians worldwide, establishing itself as a powerful medium capable of reaching supporters globally. Moreover, Facebook was selected for analysis due to the comprehensive availability of systematic party-level data across all EU member states in 2019—a feature not matched by other platforms in the studied context. Its widespread popularity makes Facebook a preferred platform for political communication, particularly during election campaigns (Dang-Xuan et al., 2013; Williams & Gulati, 2013), as politicians strive to connect with the public and garner

support. However, Lilleker et al. (2011) show that despite the interactive nature of the Web 2.0 feature integrated into the 2009 European campaign, these tools were predominantly being used for advertising at the detriment of interactive communication with citizens.

A plethora of studies focus largely on the use of Facebook and X (formerly Twitter) during electoral campaigns. Facebook and X have allowed candidates to increase their exposure at very little cost (Theocharis et al., 2015), a development that enabled lesser-known candidates to rise from obscurity (Vergeer et al., 2011)

As the media environment has evolved into a platform-based ecosystem, the communicative practices of political actors have shifted accordingly, reflecting not only new modes of dissemination but also new forms of symbolic performance. From a strategic communication perspective, Facebook operates simultaneously as a broadcasting outlet and as an engagement interface (Enli, 2017). It allows political parties to bypass traditional media gatekeepers and reach segmented audiences directly, often with highly personalized and targeted content. However, the mere volume of posts should not be conflated with communicative effectiveness. This study considers visibility—understood as the intensity of campaign output—as a symbolic performance in itself, rather than a direct measure of voter engagement or persuasive impact. This dynamic contributes to what Chadwick (2013) conceptualizes as a hybrid media system, in which legacy media, digital platforms, and party-owned outputs interact in complex feedback loops.

Within this system, the effectiveness of a campaign is no longer reducible to message clarity or ideological coherence, but depends increasingly on algorithmic amplification, temporal pacing, and participatory resonance. Importantly, the logic of social media is not only instrumental but also symbolic. Digital campaigning can be understood as a performative act, where legitimacy is constructed not through rational deliberation alone, but through affective framing, visual aesthetics, and the iterative circulation of emotionally charged content. In this view, what matters is not necessarily how widely content is shared (virality), but the symbolic gesture of communicative presence—how actively a party asserts itself in the digital public sphere. This insight draws on Edelman's (1988) theory of the political spectacle, which highlights how modern political communication relies on symbolic enactments of power. It also resonates with Alexander's (2011) notion of cultural performance, where political actors succeed by staging authenticity and authority in ways that feel credible to mediated audiences. In this sense, Facebook is not just a conduit for political messaging but a stage on which credibility is performed and legitimation is negotiated.

The EP elections offer a particularly relevant context for examining these dynamics. Scholarship has long documented a legitimacy gap in EP elections (Hix & Marsh, 2007; Schmidt, 2013), often attributed to the nationalization of campaign discourse—where domestic leaders and local grievances dominate at the expense of European-level issues. Yet recent studies suggest that parties capable of foregrounding transnational themes while adapting to digital media logic may succeed in partially bridging this gap (de Vreese, 2007). While some studies note a potential end of the second-order model (e.g., Hobolt & de Vries, 2016), others refer to its enduring relevance (e.g., Schmitt & Teperoglou, 2015; Schmitt & Toygur, 2016). In this light, social media does more than disseminate content: It reconfigures the communicative terrain on which European legitimacy is both contested and symbolically reconstructed. The participatory and affective affordances of Facebook further reinforce this dynamic. Theories of connective action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013) highlight how digital networks facilitate new forms of individualized engagement, allowing users to

align with causes or parties through memes, short-form videos, or personalized visual cues. While originally formulated in the context of protest movements, the concept applies with increasing relevance to electoral campaigns—particularly in instances where parties craft messages that are not only ideologically aligned with European integration but also formatted for virality, emotionally resonant, and easily shareable within digital publics. Additionally, the literature on issue ownership (Petrocik, 1996) offers a useful lens through which to interpret parties' thematic strategies. In the context of a European election, a party's ability to project competence on EU-level matters—such as governance, legislation, or climate policy—can enhance its legitimacy. By thematically emphasizing such domains on platforms like Facebook, parties may symbolically claim ownership over transnational issues, while simultaneously affirming their relevance in an electoral field often marked by citizen detachment and informational overload.

Taken together, this theoretical framework integrates perspectives from strategic communication, symbolic politics, and European integration studies to offer a multi-layered understanding of Facebook-based campaigning used in the 2019 EP elections. It provides the conceptual foundation for examining how thematic emphasis, platform strategies, and transnational framing intersect in shaping electoral outcomes in a digitally mediated and politically fragmented European landscape. It also lays the groundwork for analysing how symbolic visibility, rather than coherent ideological messaging, increasingly defines success in supranational digital campaigns.

3. Methodology

This article draws on data from the 2019 European Election Campaign dataset coordinated by Roma Tre University under the European Elections Monitoring Center. The dataset was compiled through a collaborative effort involving over 100 scholars across all 28 EU member states, with the aim of systematically collecting and coding electoral materials produced during the campaign. The coding protocol employed a standardized quantitative grid applied uniformly across countries, covering posters, TV spots, press advertisements, and Facebook posts.

For this analysis, we focus exclusively on Facebook campaign activity, leveraging the largest component of the dataset: 8,716 Facebook posts originating from 200 official party accounts. Each country team coded posts from national political actors using a shared template and codebook. All posts were harvested directly from the official Facebook pages of political parties and candidates, linked to a centralized European Elections Monitoring Center platform that ensured real-time collection and accessibility. The dataset includes posts published during the official campaign period, and was archived and made available at https://www.electionsmonitoringcenter.eu/archive.

To ensure analytical comparability, we filtered the data to include only those parties, alliances, and independent candidates that secured at least one seat in the 2019 EP elections. This resulted in a final analytic sample of 135 parties (72% of the original 187) and 8,469 posts. All parties in the sample were assigned to one of the EP's transnational political groups (e.g., European People's Party [EPP], Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats [S&D], The Greens/European Free Alliance [Greens/EFA]), which we use as a categorical control variable in our statistical models.

Key variables used in the analysis include:

- Total campaign output: the raw number of Facebook posts per party, used as a proxy for digital campaign intensity.
- Thematic content: two binary variables were constructed to capture whether a post addresses (a) European-level issues or (b) social media/virality themes. These were derived from the issue codes recorded in variables V29_0, V29_1, and V29_2, which allow up to three topics per post. We recoded these manually into thematic groupings based on the codebook definitions.

A post was coded as european_issue = 1 if any of its topics referenced European institutions, legislation, shared policies, or other EU-level concerns. Similarly, social_media = 1 was assigned if a topic involved platform logic, digital surveillance, fake news, or the role of social media in political discourse. Each topic variable was pre-processed to remove missing codes (−1), converted into numeric vectors, and matched against our recoding dictionary.

All data cleaning and transformations were performed in R. The thematic classification relied on manual inspection of the labels and field values in the original documentation; no automated keyword extraction or machine learning methods were employed. The classification of Facebook posts into thematic categories—specifically european_issue and social_media—was based on manual coding by the research team, drawing on predefined criteria. Variable transformations were performed in R using reproducible scripts, available upon request. Although the coding protocol was centralized and applied by trained researchers, no inter-coder reliability statistics (e.g., Cohen's kappa, Krippendorff's alpha) were released as part of the public dataset. As such, while the harmonization process ensured linguistic and structural consistency across countries (all variables were coded using numeric values and English-language labels), some measurement error due to coder subjectivity cannot be ruled out. This limitation is acknowledged in the discussion. The dataset is cross-sectional, covering a single election cycle, and observational in nature. Consequently, the relationships we identify are correlational and do not imply causation. Our core aim is to explore how variation in Facebook campaign volume and thematic emphasis aligns with electoral outcomes, while accounting for structural factors through the inclusion of party group affiliation as a control.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Visual Framing and the Semiotic Performance of Digital Campaigning

The extended content analysis of Facebook posts during the 2019 EP elections, based on cross-tabulations of visual and thematic attributes, provides a deeper understanding of how symbolic politics is enacted across digital platforms. When interpreted through the theoretical lens of hybrid media systems, political spectacle, and cultural performance, these patterns reveal a layered strategy of visibility, identity framing, and legitimacy construction.

Across nearly all regions and political groups, there is a marked predominance of original content—that is, posts produced directly by the monitored social media accounts. Over 75% of the content falls into this category, with even higher shares in Eastern Europe and among founding EU member states. This evidences not just a functional use of Facebook for dissemination, but a strategic effort to maintain discursive control

over campaign narratives. In line with Alexander's (2011) notion of cultural performance, parties appear acutely aware that political legitimacy must be staged—not merely argued—through curated, owned content.

Within this self-produced ecosystem, leaders and candidates dominate the visual field. Over 60% of analyzed photographs featured political figures as their central subject, with other categories—such as citizens, public spaces, or institutions—appearing marginally.

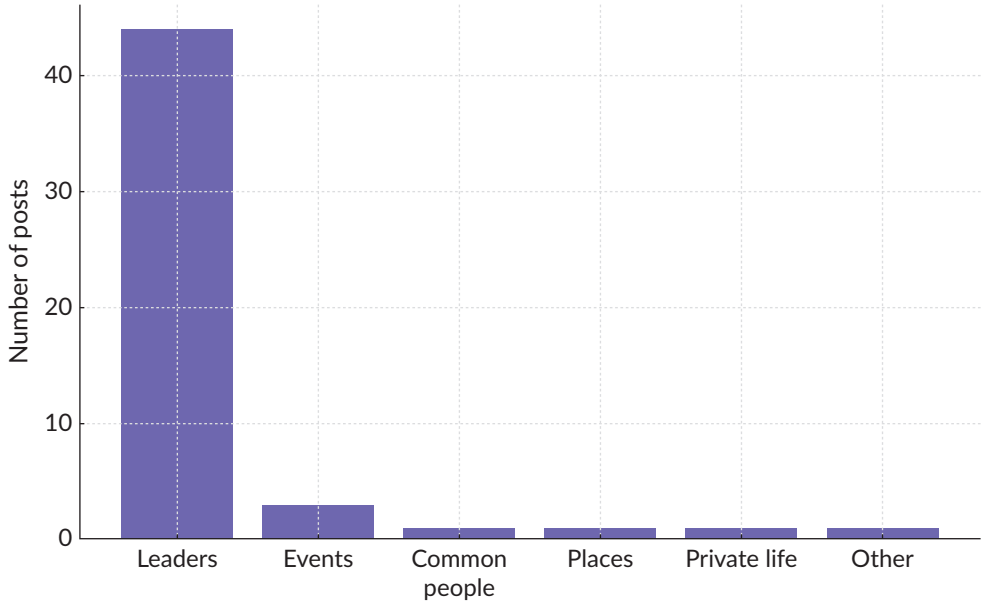


Figure 1. Primary subjects depicted in campaign photographs. Note: Political leaders dominate visual framing, followed by marginal use of public figures or symbolic landmarks.

This striking personalization echoes Edelman's (1988) theory of the political spectacle, in which the political actor becomes a signifier of authority, authenticity, and affective connection. The leader, visualized, becomes the campaign.

The formats of campaign material further reinforce the logic of digital visuality. The most common types include: webcards focused on single thematic issues; quote-based cards meant to be visually resonant and easily shared; and calls to action urging participation or viral dissemination (see Figure 2).

This modular architecture aligns with the platform logic of shareability and demonstrates parties' growing fluency in adapting to what Enli (2017) calls mediated authenticity. Political content here is not only ideational but also aesthetic, formatted for consumption within a competitive attention economy.

The video typology supports this argument. A significant share of campaign videos were either self-recorded (32.9%) or structured as short, edited segments akin to television commercials (21.2%), while others were derived from traditional media broadcasts (27.1%). This blending of amateur and professional production styles exemplifies the hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2013), where visual strategies are assembled from both legacy and digital-native formats to optimize engagement.

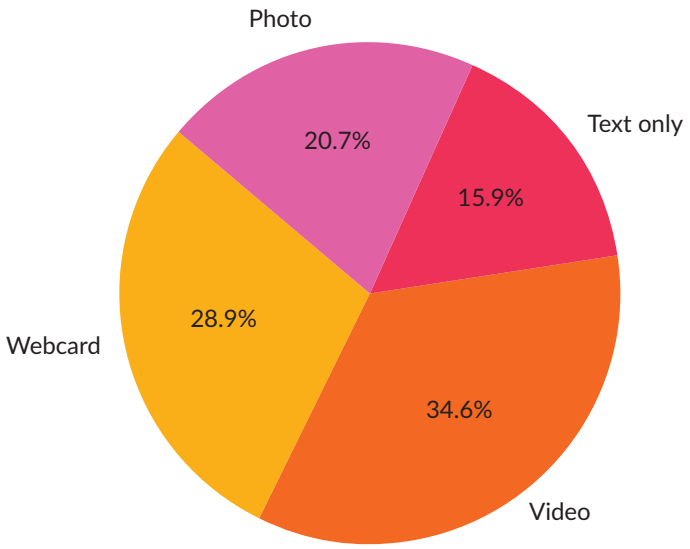


Figure 2. Distribution of visual content types (webcards, videos, photos, and text-only posts) in the 2019 EP Facebook campaign dataset.

Figure 3 illustrates the typology of video formats used by parties in their campaign communication, highlighting the prominence of self-recorded and broadcast-derived materials.

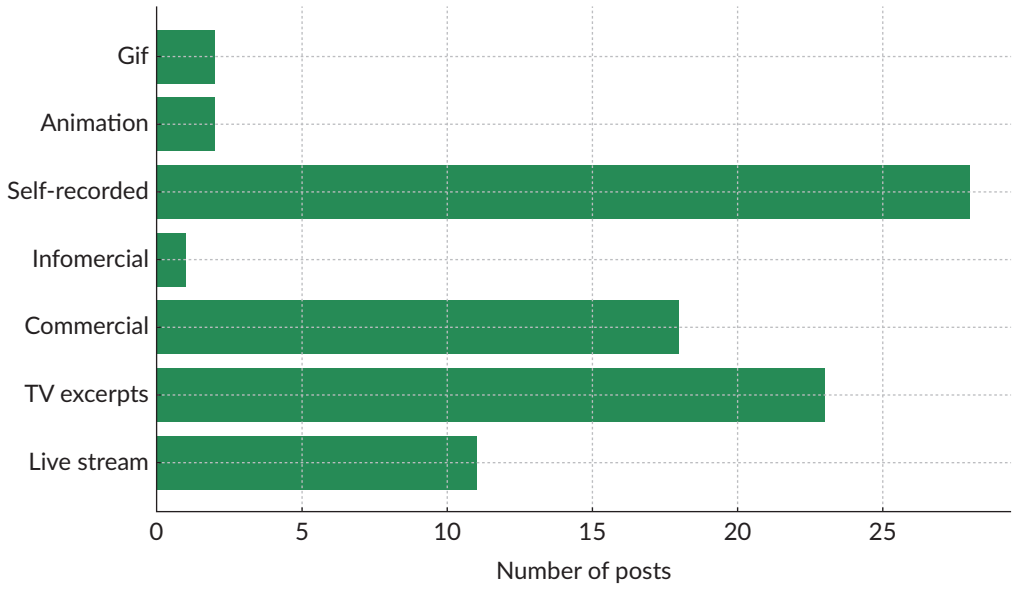


Figure 3. Typology of videos used in campaign communication. Note: Self-recorded and excerpted videos represent the majority of visual engagement formats.

Equally notable is the limited symbolic presence of the EU in the visual materials. Despite being the central institutional actor of the election, EU flags, institutions, or political group symbols appeared in fewer than 10% of posts. Even in the founding member states, typically considered more pro-European, EU imagery was underutilized. This supports existing critiques (Hix & Marsh, 2007; Schmidt, 2013) about the symbolic disconnect between EU governance and electoral imagination, and suggests that the Europeanization of discourse remains fragile at the visual level.

Nevertheless, the co-occurrence of EU themes and social media logic—as seen in the strong correlation between European issue posts and those dealing with digital themes—points to an emergent communicative strategy. Parties that combine European content with digitally adaptive formats (e.g., memes, webcards, videos) may be more effective in bridging the legitimacy gap. This hybrid content performs Europe in a format that resonates with users' emotional, symbolic, and algorithmic expectations—a form of platformed Europeanism that is both rhetorically and aesthetically attuned to the digital environment.

To summarize, the campaign strategies observed in the 2019 EP elections illustrate that Facebook is not merely a tool of message delivery, but a semiotic arena where legitimacy is staged through symbolic visibility, performative leadership, and adaptive visual grammars. The interplay between original content production, leader-centric imagery, and shareable formats underscores the transformation of European electoral politics into a field of digitally mediated symbolic struggle.

This study draws upon a comparative dataset documenting campaign activity during the 2019 EP elections across all EU member states. The dataset comprises systematically coded observations of political communication by individual parties and includes variables reflecting country of origin, political group affiliation within the EP, electoral performance (expressed as the number of seats won), and multiple indicators related to the content and format of campaign outreach, particularly on digital platforms such as Facebook. To ensure political relevance, the sample was restricted to parties, alliances, and candidates that obtained at least one seat and had verifiable campaign communication.

To concentrate the analysis specifically on digital campaigning through Facebook, we limited our dataset to observations that involved identifiable campaign messages. This was operationalized by selecting entries that either contained a written description of the campaign content (V34) or were explicitly flagged with a "yes" in variables V30 or V32, which denote the presence of online political communication. This filtering step ensured that the dataset reflected only parties that engaged in active digital campaigning, thereby allowing a focused assessment of Facebook's electoral relevance.

Subsequently, we examined the thematic orientation of the campaign content through variables V31 and V33, which include multiple comma-separated numeric codes representing the topics addressed in each campaign post. Based on a systematic review of the original codebook, we constructed two binary indicators—social_media and european_issue—by manually mapping specific numeric codes from the variables V29_0, V29_1, and V29_2 to thematic categories. Each observation could contain up to three codes; these were cleaned, split, and matched against predefined lists. The mapping process was conducted in R, and a full reproducible script is available upon request. Codes for social_media include themes such as virality, fake news, and digital platforms, while european_issue captures references to EU institutions, policies, or integration. The thematic coding was conducted manually by the authors using R, based on the official dataset documentation and label structure. No automated classification techniques were used. Although inter-coder reliability metrics (e.g., Cohen's kappa) were not released by the original consortium, all coders operated under a harmonized international protocol, with a unified codebook and templates. Any observation containing at least one relevant code was marked as positive in the respective binary variable.

These indicators were then aggregated across each unique combination of member state and European political group—European Parliament political group affiliation (EP group), labeled as GRUPPO in the

dataset—yielding a dataset structured at the country × political group level. For each unit, we computed the total number of campaign messages, the number of posts dealing with European issues or social media themes, the corresponding proportions of such posts, and the total number of seats won—recalculated directly from the raw number of seats won (SEGGI), as recorded in the original dataset provided by the European Elections Monitoring Center, values to ensure accuracy.

To investigate whether Facebook campaigning was associated with electoral performance, we performed Pearson correlation analyses between the number and proportion of thematically coded posts and the number of seats obtained by each party. These associations were further explored through scatterplots with fitted regression lines, and significance was tested using p-values.

The updated analysis reveals a moderate but statistically significant positive correlation between the total number of Facebook posts and seats won in the 2019 EP elections ($r = 0.25$, $p < 0.01$). This suggests that among the variables examined, only European-oriented messaging shows a weak but detectable association with electoral performance. Digital presence, when measured through post volume alone, appears insufficient to predict electoral outcomes without additional contextual factors.

As shown in Figure 4, parties that produced a higher volume of Facebook content tended to perform better electorally, though variation remains substantial.

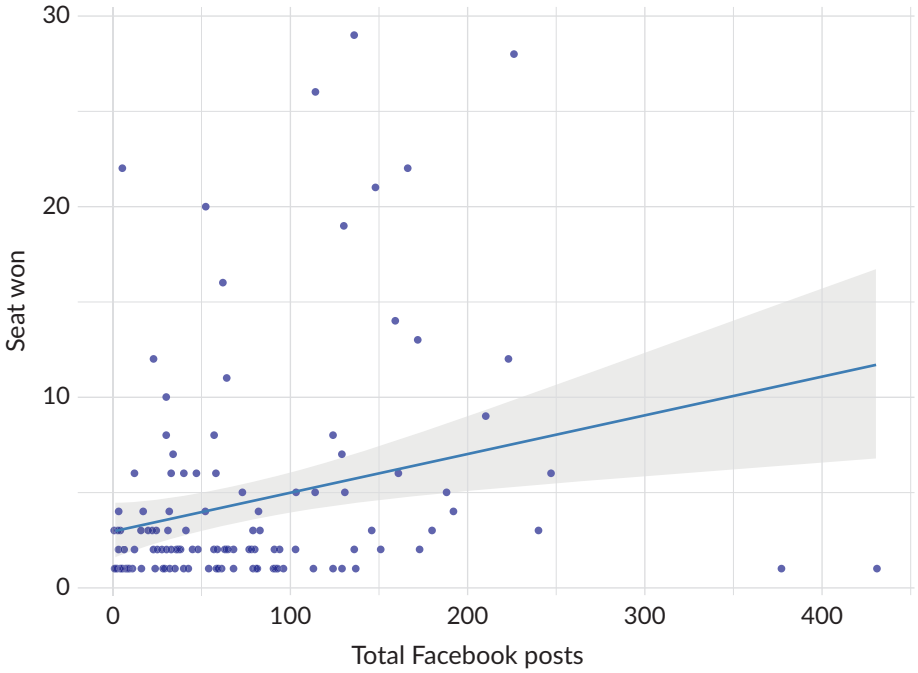


Figure 4. Correlation between total number of Facebook campaign posts and number of seats won at the 2019 EP elections (party-level data). Note: The linear fit illustrates a statistically significant positive association ($r = 0.25$, $p < 0.01$), although with substantial heterogeneity across parties.

This finding underscores the importance of sustained visibility during election periods, rather than any particular message content alone, in gaining electoral traction in today's media-saturated political environments.

Thematic content remains relevant symbolically, but our updated analysis suggests that it does not independently predict electoral outcomes. While European and digital themes frequently co-occur, their individual contributions to electoral success appear marginal once structural factors are accounted for.

As illustrated in Figure 5, parties posting more frequently on EU-related topics, including fake news and digital platforms, tended to achieve slightly better electoral results.

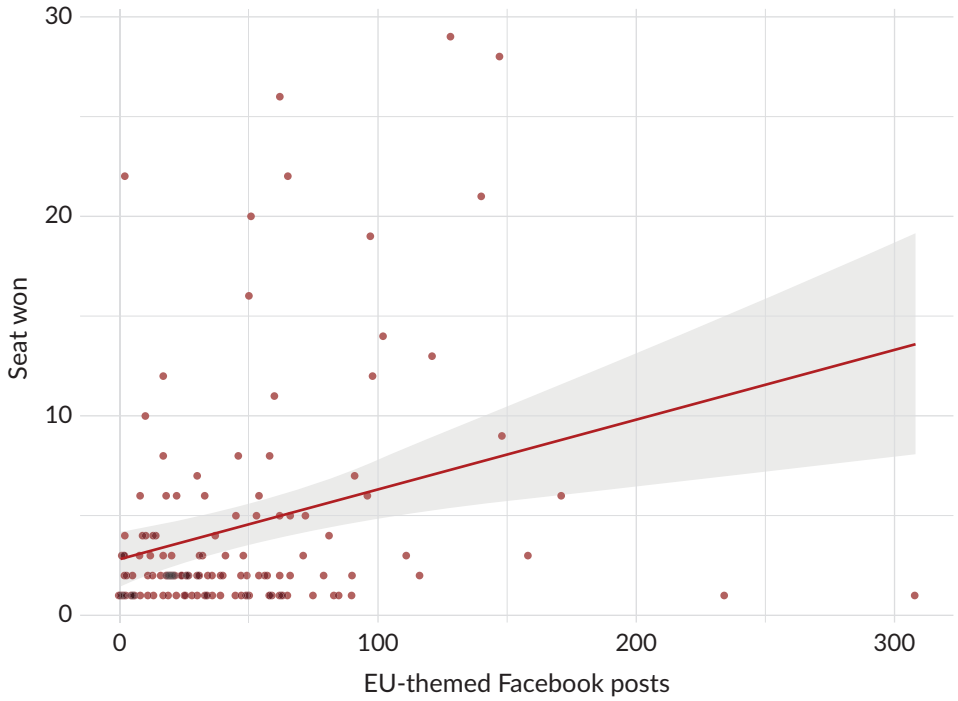


Figure 5. Correlation between the number of EU-themed posts (social media related themes—e.g., fake news, digital platforms, virality) and the number of seats won at the 2019 EP elections.

A modest but positive linear association is visible, suggesting that digital discourse may carry symbolic or mobilizing value in election campaigns. However, the proportions of these posts relative to the total campaign output (e.g., pct_social_media or pct_european_issue) did not significantly predict electoral success. This implies that it is not thematic intensity that matters, but rather the volume of communication—quantity appears to matter more than relative emphasis.

As shown in Figure 6, parties that addressed social media-related themes in their posts, such as platform governance or fake news, tended to perform slightly better electorally.

Preliminary comparative insights suggest variation across political families. Parties affiliated with ALDE (rebranded as Renew Europe after the 2019 elections) and the Greens (Verdi/ALE) appear more likely to produce high volumes of Facebook content with both European and digital themes. By contrast, parties in the EPP and S&D families tended to adopt more restrained digital strategies, both in quantity and in thematic reach. These divergences may reflect structural differences in campaign resources, generational divides in digital literacy, or strategic assumptions regarding the resonance of European content in domestic electorates. While these hypotheses lie beyond the scope of the current quantitative design, they open up

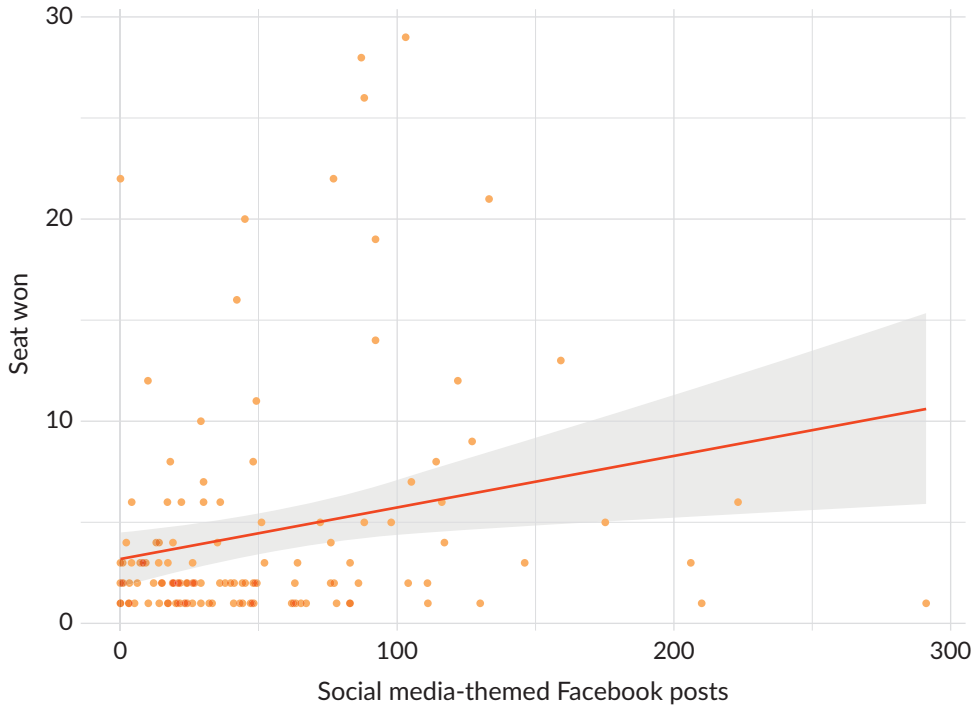


Figure 6. Correlation between number of Facebook posts addressing social media–themed content and number of seats won.

avenues for future mixed-method inquiry. Taken together, these findings highlight the extent to which Facebook operated as both a communicative infrastructure and a symbolic arena during the 2019 EP campaign. Digital visibility, particularly when coupled with Europe-oriented themes, appears to have offered measurable electoral dividends.

This interpretation is further supported by the bubble plot visualization (Figure 7), which maps each party group's proportion of European-themed posts against the total number of seats won, with bubble size representing total post volume. The bubble plot displays the proportion of EU-focused campaign posts (X-axis) against the number of seats won (Y-axis), with bubble size indicating the total volume of Facebook posts. A clear pattern of higher seat counts is visible among parties with greater overall post volume, regardless of thematic share.

This provides visual confirmation that symbolic effort alone is insufficient unless coupled with sustained digital presence. The dependent variable was the number of seats won by each party. Independent variables included the total number of Facebook posts, posts with social media themes, and posts addressing European issues. We also included a categorical control for European political group (GRUPPO), which captures structural and ideological differences across parties. Although direct data on campaign spending, incumbency, or party size were unavailable, GRUPPO partially accounts for these structural factors. We explicitly acknowledge the limitations of this model, particularly its correlational nature and the absence of critical control variables.

While our core analyses rely on group-level aggregations, we further examined party-level variation to address potential concerns related to ecological fallacy. Figure 8 presents a scatter plot of individual parties' total

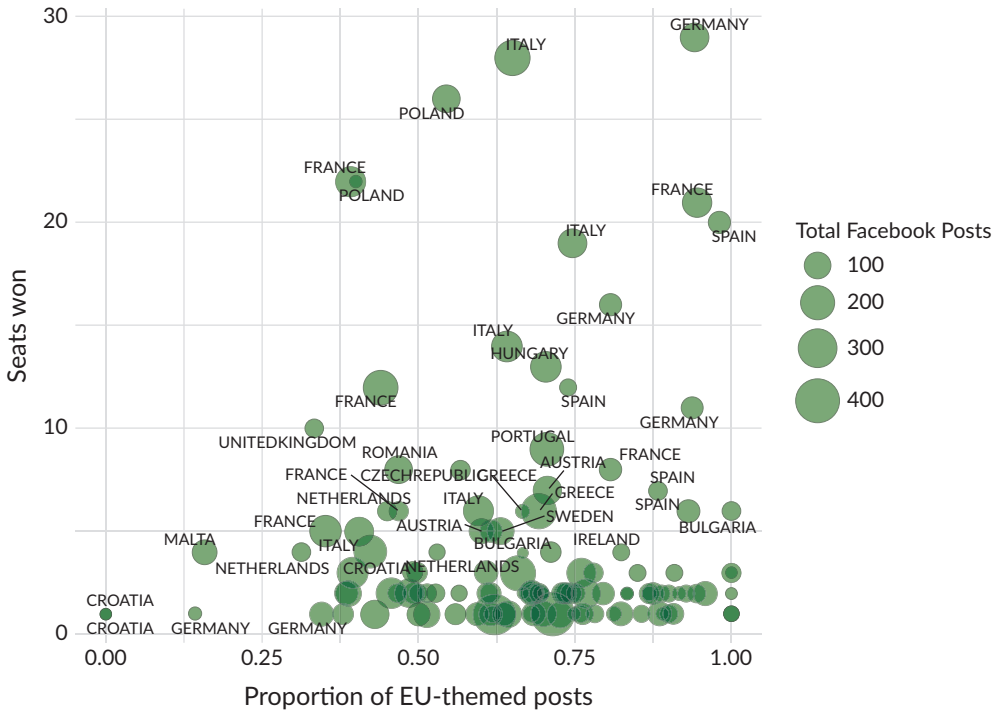


Figure 7. Proportion of European-Themed Posts vs. Electoral Success.

Facebook posts and their corresponding number of seats won in the 2019 EP elections. The disaggregated view reveals substantial variation not only across parties but also within political families.

As shown in Figure 8, the relationship between Facebook campaign activity and electoral performance varies widely across individual parties.

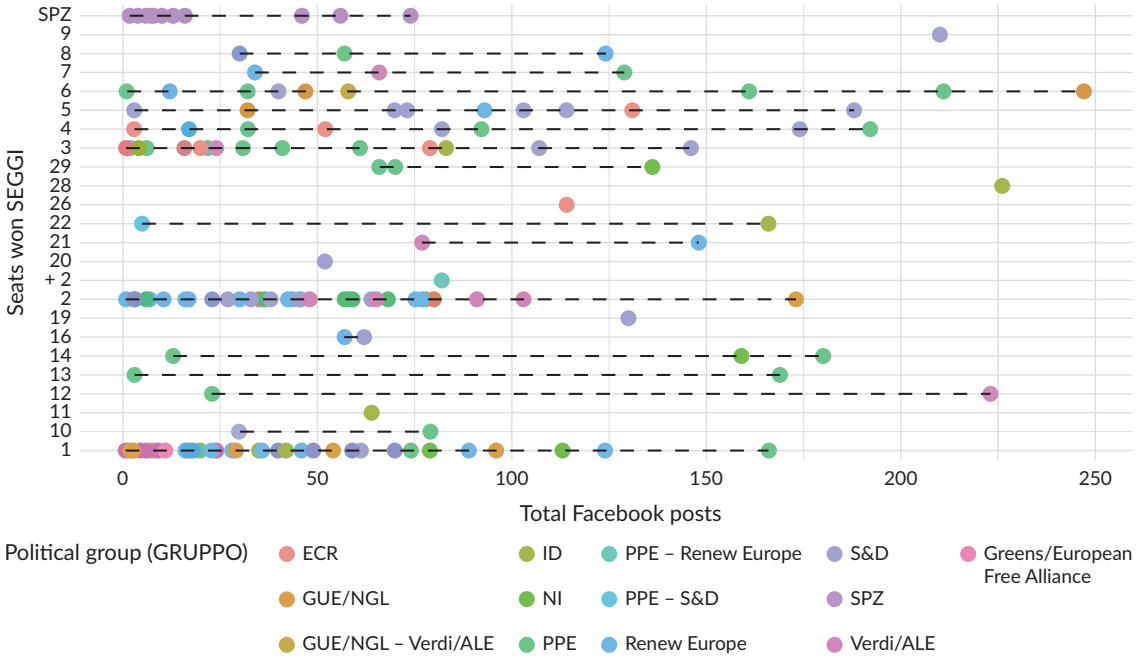


Figure 8. Scatter plot: Number of posts vs. seats won (by party)—agregated at political party level.

This heterogeneity is further visualized in Figure 9, a boxplot showing the distribution of Facebook campaign output within each EP group. Notably, even among ideologically similar parties, such as those in the PPE or S&D, there are significant differences in digital activity levels.

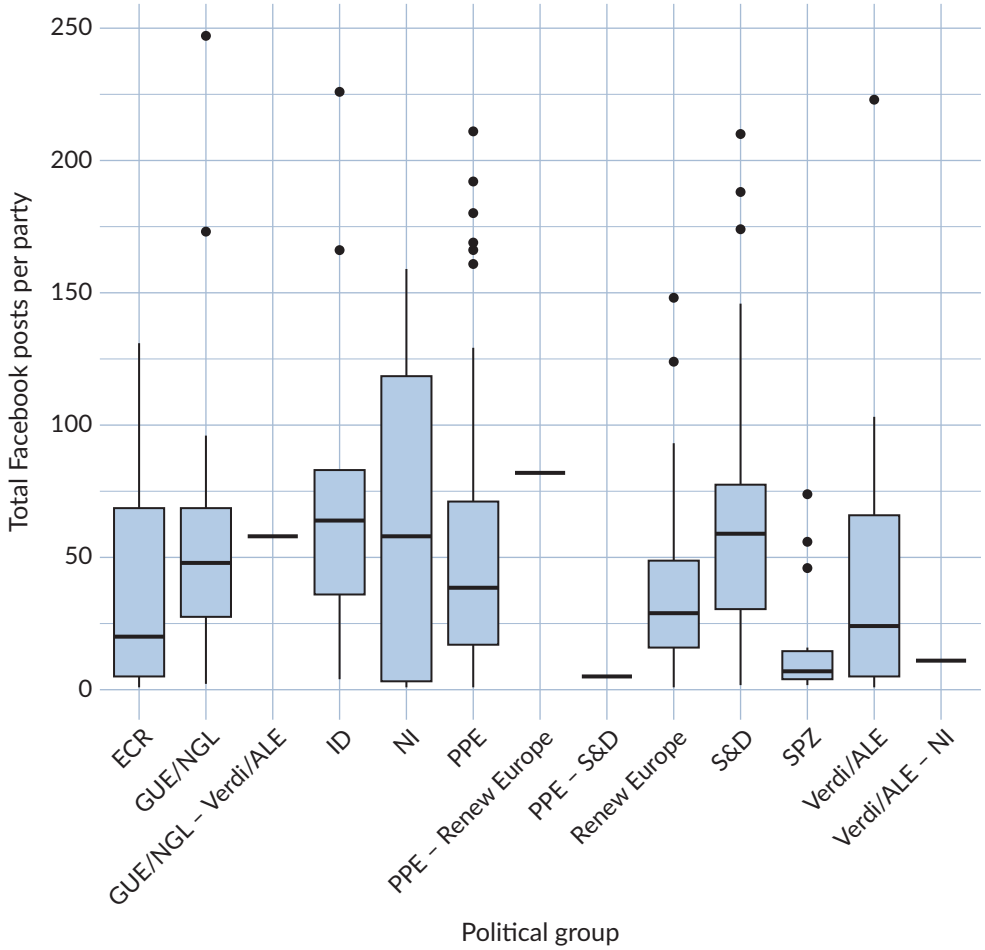


Figure 9. Boxplot: Distribution of Facebook posts by political group.

These visualizations demonstrate that political communication strategies are not uniformly adopted even within the same party family. While high output does correlate weakly with electoral performance at the party level, the association is inconsistent, reinforcing the symbolic rather than deterministic role of digital campaigning.

To further test whether digital campaign strategies predicted electoral outcomes, we estimated a multiple linear regression with the number of seats won as the dependent variable. As shown in Figure 9, only one variable—the number of posts related to European-level issues—emerges as statistically significant ($\beta = 0.056$, $p < .1$), yet does not meet the conventional 0.05 threshold, suggesting that parties emphasizing EU-wide topics in their campaign output were slightly more successful. In contrast, neither the total number of Facebook posts nor the number of posts about social media themes displayed a significant relationship with electoral performance. The model also includes EP group affiliation (GRUPPO) as a categorical control to account for structural differences across party families. As expected, belonging to the S&D group is a strong predictor of electoral success ($\beta = 18.57$, $p < .01$), reflecting institutional advantages of established center-left parties

Table 1. Multiple linear regression predicting electoral success from Facebook campaigning variables.

	Dependent variable	
	Total seats	
Total posts	−0,020	(0,030)
European issues posts	0.056*	(0,033)
Social media posts	0.010	(0.028)
GRUPPO GUE/NGL	−2,827	(2.171)
GRUPPO GUR/NGL—Verdi/ALE	0.493	(5.598)
GRUPPO ID	3.209	(2.339)
GRUPPO NI	−1.472	(2.640)
GRUPPO PPE	−0.787	(1.832)
GRUPPO PPE—S&D	18.570***	(5.556)
GRUPPO Renew Europe	−1.767	(1.896)
GRUPPO S&D	−0.173	(1.807)
GRUPPO Verdi/ALE	−2.015	(2.070)
GRUPPO Verdi/ALE-NI	−2.815	(5.558)
Constant	3.418**	(1.464)
Observations	128	
R^2	0.227	
Adjusted R^2	0.139	
Residual *SE*	5.361 ($df = 114$)	
F Statistic	2.579*** ($df = 13; 114$)	

Note: * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

in 2019. The adjusted R^2 of the model is 0.14, indicating modest explanatory power. The residual standard error (5.36) and *F*-statistic ($F = 2.579$, $p < .01$) suggest overall model significance, but underscore the limited variance explained by campaign-level digital metrics alone.

Overall, the regression and visualization together strengthen the case that electoral visibility in the European digital sphere is structured less by topic and more by rhythm—that is, by the algorithmically recognized persistence and intensity of engagement.

The empirical findings of this study offer a compelling illustration of how strategic visibility, thematic framing, and digital media logics converge to shape electoral performance in the EP context. When situated within the theoretical framework outlined above, several key insights emerge regarding the performative nature of political legitimacy and the operational dynamics of campaigning on Facebook.

First, the strong positive correlation between the total number of campaign posts and the number of seats won affirms the premise that algorithmic visibility and volume of communication are crucial resources in the contemporary hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2013). This supports the notion that success in European elections is increasingly dependent on maintaining persistent symbolic presence in the digital arena, rather than relying solely on programmatic or ideological clarity. While the research refers to "algorithmic visibility," we clarify that this term is used metaphorically to describe the logic of attention allocation on platforms like

Facebook. The dataset does not include interaction-level metrics such as engagement rates or reach, and thus no direct measurement of algorithmic processes is attempted. In the language of Edelman (1988), the political spectacle materializes here through sheer visibility: Political actors who successfully "flood" digital platforms with content perform power, presence, and relevance.

Second, the significant association between social media–themed posts and electoral success aligns with theories of connective action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). It suggests that parties capable of framing their messages in formats that resonate with digital publics—whether through discussions of fake news, platform governance, or engagement metaphors—are more likely to be rewarded electorally. Importantly, this does not necessarily imply ideological alignment with platform cultures, but rather strategic adaptation to their communicative grammar. The affective and participatory affordances of Facebook—short videos, emotional cues, viral tropes—appear to constitute a new form of symbolic capital, one that is politically convertible when managed skillfully.

Third, the correlation between European-issue-focused posts and the number of seats obtained provides empirical grounding to the claim that European legitimacy is not only eroded by nationalization (Hix & Marsh, 2007) but can also be strategically reconstructed through digital discourse. Parties that articulate European narratives in a digital vernacular, what we might call platformed Europeanism, seem to regain some of the legitimacy deficit traditionally associated with EP elections. This lends empirical weight to de Vreese's (2007) claim that Europeanization of campaign content is both possible and electorally advantageous under the right media and strategic conditions, showing at the same time that European elections are seen less as second-order elections. This finding is indeed in line with existing research (Beach et al., 2018) that argues that the political campaigning leading up to the EP elections makes them less second-order.

Yet, the lack of significant correlation between the proportion of European or digital posts and electoral results nuances this narrative. It indicates that quantity matters more than proportion, and that legitimacy in this context is not necessarily awarded for thematic consistency or coherence, but for communicative saturation. From the perspective of Alexander's (2011) theory of cultural performance, this could be interpreted as a shift from message integrity to performance density—where legitimacy is judged not by thematic purity, but by volume, frequency, and emotional connectivity.

Finally, the strong internal correlation between European issues and social media content suggests that these are not distinct dimensions but intertwined modes of symbolic production. This intersection supports the hypothesis that digitally mediated narratives of Europe—framed in emotionally salient, shareable, and semiotically rich formats—constitute a particularly effective rhetorical strategy. When campaigns link European legitimacy to affectively charged digital frames, they not only bridge the national-European divide, but also recode transnational politics into the idioms of platform culture.

In sum, the empirical patterns identified in this study lend strong support to the theoretical claim that Facebook is not simply a channel for campaign distribution but a symbolic environment in which legitimacy, credibility, and visibility are continuously negotiated. Political communication on Facebook during the 2019 EP elections reflects not just an adaptation to media logic, but a deeper transformation in how European electoral politics is staged, perceived, and ultimately validated.

This study has several limitations. First, the dataset is cross-sectional and does not allow causal inference. Second, certain structural party-level variables—such as campaign budgets, incumbency, or previous electoral strength—were not available. We used GRUPPO as a proxy, though it only partially accounts for these factors. Third, our operationalization of digital visibility relies on post volume rather than user engagement or algorithmic reach. Finally, while the original dataset followed a centralized protocol, inter-coder reliability metrics were not released, and coding consistency across countries cannot be independently verified.

5. Conclusion

The 2019 EP elections mark a significant evolution in the landscape of political communication, where Facebook emerged not merely as a distribution channel but as a symbolic arena for performing political legitimacy, visibility, and affective resonance. Our study demonstrates that electoral success in the digital age is increasingly tied to the volume and rhythm of online engagement rather than the thematic depth or ideological coherence of campaign messages. The strong correlation between the number of Facebook posts and the number of seats won underscores the importance of algorithmic visibility and persistent symbolic presence in shaping electoral outcomes.

Importantly, while posts addressing European issues and digital themes were positively associated with electoral performance, it was the sheer quantity of content—rather than its proportional emphasis—that proved most predictive. This finding suggests that in the hybrid media system, legitimacy is constructed through communicative saturation and emotional connectivity, rather than through consistent messaging. The study also highlights the emergence of a "platformed Europeanism," where transnational political narratives are adapted to the communicative logic of social media, making them more accessible, emotionally resonant, and shareable with the public. In addition, this challenges the second-order elections model, showing that during the EP elections the public tends to focus less on EU institutional themes and more on political figures, as the data shows that in many cases, the leader becomes the campaign itself.

Our findings carry several implications for both scholars and practitioners. First, for political campaigners, the findings emphasize the strategic value of sustained digital presence. Campaigns should prioritize consistent, high-volume content production tailored to the aesthetic and emotional expectations of social media users. This includes leveraging visual storytelling, leader-centric imagery, and modular formats like web cards and short videos.

Second, for democratic institutions, the study raises questions about the nature of democratic legitimacy in the digital age. If visibility and emotional resonance outweigh ideological clarity and debating EU issues, there is a risk that electoral success may hinge more on social media performance than on policy, strategy or vision for the future of the EU.

And lastly, for scholars, the co-occurrence of European themes and social media strategies suggests a new avenue for studying the Europeanization of political discourse. Future research should explore how digital platforms can be harnessed to bridge the legitimacy gap in EU governance and foster a more transnational public sphere.

The findings also bring into light the power of algorithmic amplification in shaping political outcomes. As platforms like Facebook continue to mediate democratic processes, there is a growing need for transparency in content curation and for safeguards that ensure fair and equitable access to digital visibility.

This study therefore contributes to a deeper understanding of how social media platforms are reshaping the dynamics of European electoral politics. It calls for a rethinking of campaign strategies, democratic engagement, and regulatory frameworks in light of the performative and algorithmic nature of digital political communication.

This study is limited by its reliance on coded campaign content without integrating reception-side data. Future research could explore how such visual and thematic framing strategies are perceived by different voter segments, especially through experimental or ethnographic methods.

Further research should try to avoid limiting their analysis to Facebook and instead focus on a comparative analysis of the use of different SNSs during European election campaigns in order to assess the way political parties and candidates use social media platforms that differ in scope, reach, and characteristics. As the use of social media is expected to become universal (Gulati & Williams, 2013), more national case studies and more studies on the use of SNSs by politicians and political organisations in non-electoral periods are required to fully comprehend the way the patterns of communication change between non-electoral and electoral periods and between national electoral periods and European electoral periods.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability

The dataset was archived and is available at https://www.electionsmonitoringcenter.eu/archive

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About the Authors



Antonio Amuza is a sociologist and assistant professor at the University of Bucharest, Faculty of Journalism and Communication Sciences. His research focuses on political communication, semiotics, and empirical approaches to media, advertising, and communication.



Bianca Fox is a senior lecturer at Nottingham Trent University and a principal fellow of the Higher Education Academy. Prior to joining NTU, Bianca was the deputy director of the Film, Media, Discourse, and Culture Research Centre, the acting head of department at the University of Wolverhampton, and a lecturer at the University of Huddersfield. Bianca holds a PhD in communication studies and has more than 15 years of teaching experience in higher education in the UK and other European countries. Her research interests include young people's perceptions and use of technology, digital literacy, and digital inclusion. She is also passionate about developing continuing professional development programmes and, as a course design expert, she was the academic lead of the ERASMUS+ MeLDE project, contributing to the design of a CPD programme in digital literacy for European educators.



Valentina Marinescu is a PhD professor in sociology. Her research interests are in the field of communication and mass media with a special focus on Eastern Europe.